Deep Punishment and Internal Colony: A Critical Analysis of In-School Suspension Rooms Inside Two Racially "Integrated" Middle Schools

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Abstract

In this article, we examine an overlooked issue in research on school discipline: in-school suspension. Using data collected through observational methods, we present a detailed description and analysis of two in-school suspension rooms. These rooms operated in prominent, racially diverse middle schools in a large urban district. Applying critical theories of race and social exclusion, we reveal the ways that in-school suspension rooms constituted *deep*, exclusionary discipline and cast *wide discipline nets* that disproportionately impacted Black students and Latino students for minor reasons and provided few educational opportunities. Due to the racialized nature of in-school suspension in otherwise "integrated" schools, the rooms themselves became segregated *internal racial colonies* with implications for the racial distribution of education as a social, political, and economic good.

Keywords In-school suspension · Race · Discipline nets · Internal colony · Observational method

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Introduction

> The in-school suspension room has black paper over the windows. The ceiling is low, the lights are dim. There are eight students in the room, three near the front and five near the far wall. Near the front, a White female student looks at a book, a Black female student sits at a computer. A Black male student sits with his hood covering his head, which rests on the desk in front of him. The other students, all of color, sit along the far wall, one reading a book, another student has his head in his hands, another sits, picking his fingernails. All appear to be waiting for punishment to end.
> [Dalton Middle School, April 22, 2019]

Over the last two decades, dozens of studies have been published on exclusionary school discipline, most of which have focused on out-of-school suspension (Welsh & Little, 2018a, 2018b). These studies have revealed the disproportionate discipline of Black students and Latino students and the negative impacts out-of-school suspension has on students' academic and educational opportunities. This scholarship has been key to spurring changes in discipline policy and practice (Mediratta, 2012; Ritter, 2018). However, the focus on out-of-school suspension has left other discipline practices on the margins of research, one being in-school suspension. Very few studies have examined in-school suspension, despite that millions of in-school suspensions are used each year. What is known is mostly quantitative and limited to student and school characteristics. Less is known about what takes place inside in-school suspension rooms.

In this article, we investigate in-school suspension rooms using qualitative, observational methods. Specifically, we present a detailed description and analysis of data collected over five months inside two in-school suspension rooms at prominent, racially diverse, middle schools in a large urban district. Using critical theories of race and social exclusion, we reveal the ways that in-school suspension rooms constituted a *deep* form of punishment used as part of *wide discipline nets* ensnaring large numbers of Black students and Latino students for minor offenses. Because of the racialized nature of in-school suspension in otherwise "integrated" schools, the rooms themselves became *internal racial colonies* inside predominantly White schools.

Exclusionary School Discipline

We situate our study within the field of research known as exclusionary school discipline. We first define several key terms for the reader. To *exclude* is to refuse admittance or to force out (Agnes & Laird, 2002). *Exclusion* is upheld by those that bar access and is the condition endured by those who are forced to the margins (Stevenson & Lindberg, 2010). *Discipline*, within the context of schooling, includes methods used to prevent and respond to conflict in classrooms and schools. *Exclusionary school discipline*, then, consists of methods of punishment that remove or

bar students from the rest of the school community. Among the family of discipline practices used to exclude students are out-of-school suspension, expulsions, alternative educational settings, and, as addressed here, in-school suspension (Welsh & Little, 2018a, 2018b).

Methods of exclusion differ as to whether they bar students from regular classrooms or from school grounds entirely. By *regular classrooms,* we mean the classes and activities that are a part of a students' typical school schedule. Some discipline practices are short term, such as detention and in-school suspension, and remove students for a class period to a day, whereas others are longer term (such as placement in alternative educational settings, see *East Campus Continuation High School* in Gregory et al., 2006). Discipline practices further differ in terms of where they physically occur. Time outs and in-school suspension retain students *inside* the school building, albeit sequestered to another physical setting, while out-of-school suspension, expulsion, and alternative placements bar students from entry into the school building altogether.

History, Race, and Exclusionary School Discipline

Methods of exclusionary discipline today are highly racialized, with the largest disparities between Black students and White students (Welsh & Little, 2018a, 2018b). We understand these disparities to be rooted in the history of school desegregation, a history that implicates exclusionary discipline as a mechanism used to resist integration and to exclude Black students from White schools (Edelman et al., 1975; Meier et al., 1989; Yudof, 1975). In the first analyses of national discipline data from what was then the newly created Office for Civil Rights, the Children's Defense Fund found that already 29 states were suspending over 5% of all Black students enrolled (Edelman et al., 1975, p. 76). Officials monitoring desegregation plans described suspension as a direct reaction of Whites to desegregation. One official in Boston having watched the system desegregate from 1973 to 1975, concluded that "tremendous disparities in rates of suspension between Black and White students in Boston" were the result of an "entire system saturated by hostility to the court's desegregation order and to the Black students who are perceived as having caused the order" (Edelman et al., 1975, p. 77). Wide disparities between Black and White students have been documented in the years since (Welsh & Little, 2018a, 2018b). Presently, Black students are subject to exclusionary discipline at 2 to 4 times the rate of their White peers (Welsh & Little, 2018a, 2018b). Nationally, of the 2.5 million students that received one or more out-of-school suspensions nationally during the 2015–2016 school year, 41% were Black students and 32% were White students, despite being 15% and 49% of the U.S. student population respectively (U.S. Dep. of Education, 2015-2016a; U.S. Dep. of Education, 2015-2016b).

The Cost of Exclusion

Research consistently shows that out-of-school suspension is negatively correlated with student achievement (see Welsh & Little, 2018a, 2018b for a comprehensive

review). Furthermore, the underlying premise behind exclusionary discipline—that punishment will "fix" or prevent future misconduct—remains unsubstantiated. Rather than reducing misconduct, evidence suggests that suspension leads to future suspensions. Raffaele Mendez's (2003) longitudinal analysis found that one of the two best predictors of 6th grade suspension for both Black students and White students was whether they had been suspended in earlier grades. Mendez concludes that "disciplining elementary and middle school students with out-of-school suspension predicts future suspensions" and "has no measurable positive deterrent" (p. 25). Evidence from other studies further support this link (Arcia, 2006; Tobin & Sugai, 1999; Welsh & Little, 2018a, 2018b).

While there is an intuitive connection between removing students from class and adverse outcomes, the "casual effects of exclusionary discipline are somewhat elusive" and are complicated by the idea of confounding variables (Welsh & Little, 2018a, 2018b, p. 332). This can lead some to argue that student characteristics explain student adverse outcomes *rather* than discipline practices. As Hwang (2018) notes, the "associations between suspension and negative educational achievement can also be explained by student behavior that results in suspension rather than suspension itself" (Hwang, p 10). However, a separate body of research indicates that school and district *policies* about discipline practices have far more to do with rates of exclusionary discipline than do student behavior and demographics (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Monroe, 2005; Skiba et al., 2011; Wu et al., 1982). This research indicates that different rates of exclusionary discipline can exist across similar schools with similar student populations and are the result of policy choices, not student characteristics. Scholars of "the discipline gap," argue that low achievement is *the logical result* of discipline policies that exclude students from classrooms, thus reducing educational opportunities (Gregory et al., 2010). Despite evidence of suspensions inefficacy, roughly 2 million out-of-school suspensions are still used each year (U.S. Dep. of Education, 2015-2016a), resulting in 11.4 million instructional days lost overall and 5.11 million days lost for Black students specifically (U.S. Dep. of Education, 2015-2016d). The adverse impacts of suspension on Black achievement have led many to argue suspension is a key explanation behind the "achievement gap," or what has more accurately called the "opportunity gap" (Carter et al., 2013; Gregory et al., 2010).

An Overlooked form of Exclusionary Discipline: In-School Suspension

Within the category of exclusionary discipline, in-school suspension has received far less attention. As its name suggests, in-school suspension occurs *inside* of schools. Typically, students serving in-school suspension are assigned to a separate classroom, during which time they are prohibited from participating in regular school activities (Noltemeyer et al., 2015). According to technical definitions, in-school suspension can range from a partial school day to multiple days (Fabelo et al., 2011). According to federal data, approximately 2.7 million students received one or more in-school suspensions nationally, putting this practice on par with out-of-school suspension's 2.5 million impacted students (U.S. Dep. of Education, 2015-2016c).

Whereas the bulk of research on exclusionary discipline has focused on out-of-school suspension, research on in-school suspension has thus far been limited. A small, but growing, body of research offers several initial insights. First, available research points to racial disparities in the use of in-school suspension. Analyzing disparities in a large urban district) Anyon et al. (in-press) found that Black students were significantly more likely to receive in-school suspension compared to White students, and often for minor offenses (e.g., being late to class, profanity). Cholewa et al. (2017) found that Black students were more likely to receive in-school suspension than their White peers and the percentage of Black students in the school predicted in-school suspension rates. Jabbari and Johnson (2020) also found that the percentage of Black students was positively associated with higher rates of in-school suspension. Hilberth and Slate (2014) found that Black middle schoolers in Texas were twice as likely to receive in-school suspension as White students. Blake et al. (2011) found that the likelihood of in-school suspension for Black girls in one midwestern district was higher than for their Latino peers and White peers. However, Skiba et al., 2011 found the opposite pattern, that Black middle school students were less likely to receive in-school suspension than their White peers, suggesting that variation in in-school suspensions by race is not always consistent.

A second early finding from in-school suspension research suggests that it negatively impacts student achievement. Using survey data from one California district, Hwang (2018) examined the longitudinal associations between educational achievement in Math and English Language Arts and suspensions over a three-year period. Findings showed that in-school suspensions were related to decreases in academic achievement, controlling for demographic characteristics and quarter, school, teacher, and grade fixed-effects. This relationship was stronger when students received multiple in-school suspensions (Hwang, 2018). Cholewa et al. (2017) analyzed a nationally representative sample of high school student data, finding a negative association between in-school suspension and school completion. Even when controlling for competing explanations, students who received in-school suspension were nearly five times less likely to finish school than their peers. They also found that students who received in-school suspension had significantly lower subsequent achievement than students who had not received an in-school suspension, suggesting that in-school suspension uniquely contributes to a decline in achievement. Jabbari and Johnson (2020) expanded the focus of extant research on suspended students to include the relationships between in-school suspension rates and high school achievement and college attendance among all students (both suspended and not). Using a nationally representative sample of high school students, they found that students who attend high schools with higher rates of in-school suspension—regardless of whether they were suspended or not—had lower math achievement and were less likely to attend college full time. The qualitative aspects of in-school suspension are far less understood, with scant research on in-school suspension settings (Cholewa et al., 2017). In other words, while research speaks to the prevalence of in-school suspension, and who it impacts, and how, there is little evidence as to what actually occurs in schools. We could locate only two such studies, both of which were relatively dated. Chobot and Garibaldi (1982) reviewed 10 federally funded, district run in-school suspension programs. They found that grant recipients ran in-school

suspension programs that were often housed in the school building, assigned to a permanent setting, or "room," (usually a classroom). Each room had textbooks and materials for completing coursework, a designated professional such as a teacher or counselor, and academic assignments for students. Authors indicated that multi-step referral processes were necessary to avoid in-school suspension "dumping ground" for students. Direct teacher referrals were not allowed, and only the principal or staff in charge of discipline could assign students to in-school suspension. Chobot and Garibaldi (1982) observed that principals had the most direct control over the function of the in-school suspension programs. They also found that, in some instances, notification and due process procedures were lacking.

Diem (1988) conducted a case study of in-school suspension at a middle school in a large school district. Diem observed that all decisions and student referrals relating to the program went through the principal or primary discipline staff. The in-school suspension room was housed in one specific classroom and supervised by a teacher. Students were sent there for minor incidents (vulgarity, smoking, being late to class). Students were assigned for 1–3 days and were expected to complete classwork. Diem observed that, over time, the room acted "as a holding pen for students who were judged by a teacher or administrator as uncooperative, disruptive, or disobedient" (p. 37) and that teachers came to view it as a "dumping ground" for "those students they did not want" (p. 38). Diem found that the program was ineffective as a behavioral modification or deterrent, the program was ineffective, evident in "repeat offenders," who were most often Black male students and Latino male students, as were most of the students sent to the room, despite the school being majority White (p. 38).

We are unaware of additional studies of the conditions of in-school suspension rooms. Findings from Chobot and Garibaldi (1982) and Diem (1988) point to concerns about the inefficacy of in-school suspension and the disproportionate impact of it on Black students and Latino students, who through in-school suspension are excluded from the regular school community. It is striking that these two studies are over thirty years old. Current federal data suggests in-school suspension continues to be heavily used, yet what is happening inside contemporary in-school suspension rooms remains largely unexamined. Given this, we conducted a qualitative, observational study to answer a relatively simple question, *what is happening inside in-school suspension rooms?* We initiated this inquiry for the purposes of expanding the research knowledge about the implementation conditions of in-school suspension in select schools. Before describing our research methods, we first describe the theoretical perspectives that informed our approach to the study.

Theoretical Framing

Our study is situated within a critical, sociological paradigm. Critical scholars examine issues of social inequality, power, domination, and exploitation. We are primarily concerned with the sociological concept of race—defined as a social construct with material impact—nd the ways that schools, in particularly, are implicated in the (re)production of longstanding racialized inequalities in education and society.

Within the field of school discipline, we locate ourselves among those who have theorized how discipline policies and practices contribute to racialized inequalities.

School Discipline Nets

We first draw from the work of Decoteau Irby (2013, 2014), whose scholarship offers a heuristic for understanding the sociological structure of school discipline policy and practice. Irby's conceptualization of punishment, informed by the sociology of deviance, conceives of it as a mechanism of state control, used to define and suppress criminal and delinquent behavior (Irby, 2013). Just as state operatives expand a net of social control over the public in the form of laws and punishments, ensnaring dissidents and "criminals," schools too exercise nets of social control over students in the form of discipline policies and consequences (Irby, 2013). When students transgress an implicit or explicit behavioral expectation, adults in school respond using an array of consequences, what Irby calls "enforcement machinery" to mark the transgression and coerce desired behavior from students (p. 2014, 213). These *discipline nets* "have form and fluidity" (Irby, 2014, p. 516) and are shaped by "professional perspectives, philosophies of discipline, policies and practices" which are "subject to shifting moods and tolerance based on the school's embedded position in the nation, state, region, district and neighborhood context" (Irby, 2014, p. 517).

School discipline nets have both *depth* and *breadth*, the former, reflecting the "severity of trouble to which students are subjected" and the latter "reflect[ing] the likelihood of getting into trouble" and the latter (Irby, 2014, p. 517). "Deep" nets are those that focus on severe, punitive punishment, in immediacy, duration and intensity, and are those that add multiple discipline consequences, which culminated in more obstacles to returning to the classroom. Relatively speaking, deep nets are characterized by changes in discipline policy that prohibit previously acceptable behaviors. "Shallow" nets are those that utilize minor forms of punishment and that, simply put, make it easier for students to get back on track in their learning environment. Shallow nets limit the number of students out of class and the amount of time they spend serving out discipline consequences. "Wide" nets are characterized by changes in policy that expand what counts as inappropriate behavior. Conversely, "narrow" nets draw a limited number of students and are characterized in policy and practice as limiting what constitutes misbehavior. We use Irby's ideas to ground us in a sociological perspective on the function of discipline as a method for reinforcing relative and hegemonic values, while also using his ideas of *depth* and *width,* to categorize the patterns of activities we observed occurring inside in-school suspension settings.

Social Exclusion

Because in-school suspension occurs in physical settings set away from regular classrooms, we must, as critical sociologists, build a theoretical framework that attends to the issue of *social exclusion* inherent in this practice. To build our analytic

power to investigate the social dimensions and racial implications of exclusion, we integrate the work of several scholars. First, we draw from the work of Hilary Silver, whose scholarship on social exclusion provides a language for making sense of the social process of exclusion and its implications. Social exclusion is both a condition, i.e. *one who is excluded,* and a process, i.e. *a sequence of steps that exclude.* Exclusion is a societal phenomenon that breaches the basic link between person and community. According to Silver:

> Social exclusion is a rupturing of the social bond. It is a process of declining participation, access, and solidarity. At the societal level, it reflects inadequate social cohesion or integration. At the individual level, it refers to the incapacity to participate in normatively expected social activities and to building meaningful relationships (2006, p. 4411)

As a discipline practice, Silver's ideas translate to suggest that exclusionary discipline breaches the connection between student and school community. Silver notes that exclusion functions on a continuum, much like discipline practices function along a continuum of separation. This continuum includes, for those subjected to it, a series of "intermediate steps of vulnerability and precariousness" (2006, p. 4411). The mechanisms of exclusion are many. According to Silver, they include: "extermination, exile, abandonment, ostracism, shaming, marginalization, segregation, and discrimination" (Silver, 2006, p. 4411). We interpret this within the area of school discipline to mean that disciplinary exclusion includes those practices that denigrate, segregate, and isolate students. Social exclusion operates as a boundary maintenance mechanism, one that keeps groups apart and that "reinforces internal solidarity" between those excluded and those doing the exclusion. Exclusion has both an economic and social dimension, depriving one of resources and capital, while also depriving one of human interaction (Silver, 2006). Social exclusion benefits groups who do the excluding. For these groups, exclusion allows for the "hoarding" of advantages and resources (Silver, 2006, p. 4411). Regarding school discipline, much has been said about the function of discipline practices as a mechanism of White opportunity hoarding functioning to push out Black students and Latino students who would otherwise economically and politically compete with White students (Anderson, 2010; Lewis & Diamond, 2015). When school discipline is used in ways that physically separate students along racial lines, it is consistent with the notion of *racialized sequestering* (Wiley, 2021). Scholarship on racial sequestering is thus far rooted in a historical perspective of Black-White school desegregation, and points, in particular, to how the physical separation of students by racialized school discipline processes in contemporary, "integrated" schools occurs through simultaneous processes of *racial exemption* (for White students) and *racialized sequestering* (for Black students). Sequestering Black students through discipline practices, while leaving White students exempt, communicates messages to the entire school community about Black racial inferiority and White superiority (Anderson, 2010; Wiley, 2021; Gillborn, 1992; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Watts & Erevelles, 2004). When social exclusion is enjoined with racialized physical separation, it creates *internal colonies*, a term originated by Fanon (1963) and brought into school discipline studies by Watts & Erevelles, 2004, who theorize school discipline

as a means of colonizing education with political and economic implications. In this framework, race is a key organizing construct, and understood as one upon which White people have quite literally engineered economic and political systems, and the physical geography of cities and institutions, to exploit the labor of Black people. Physical separation, coupled with economic and social exploitation, are enforced systematically and intentionally through the use of state policing and surveillance, to "create a situation of 'haves' and 'have nots,' whereby both social classes must operate under the same economic and political system, but with different results and in different environments" (Watts & Erevelles, 2004, p. 284). Extended to the realm of schooling, school discipline nets are analogous to the idea of municipal policing and state control, and isolated school discipline classrooms, particularly under conditions of racial segregation, may come to form an isolated and excluded internal colony. In conclusion, we read our research question, *what is happening inside in-school suspension rooms?,* through a critical, sociological lens that prioritizes consideration of the control function of school discipline nets (Irby, 2013, 2014), the nature and implications of social exclusion (Silver, 2006), and the role of in-school discipline as a process of racialized sequestering and internal colonization (Wiley, 2021; Watts & Erevelles, 2004). Using these theoretical frameworks allows us to articulate the social and racialized meaning of what we observed in schools, and related implications.

Method

To answer the research question, *what is happening inside in-school suspensions rooms?,* we elected to use observational method. Observational method involves recording interactions in real time, "as [they are] happening" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 139). Our use of observation was important methodologically because of the nature of the research question and because strong inducements in the current political context of schools may reduce the accuracy of self-report data available from survey or interview-based studies. Due to the scrutiny school discipline has received over the last decade, school staff in particularly may feel social pressure to minimize information about using punitive discipline practices and racial dynamics to avoid social disapproval from researchers and the public. Direct observation does not fully mitigate this issue, as participants may change their behavior in the presence of researchers but conducting observations over a sustained period of time arguably strengthens the likelihood of gathering representative data of social behavior (Carspecken, 1996; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Observation is a research tool when it is used systematically to address a specific research question (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Systematicity is key; the act of recording observations (i.e., choosing what one writes down) is an experience in which "[the participant observer] uses [their] own knowledge and expertise in interpreting what is observed…" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 137). Critics argue that the process of writing observations is highly subjective and unreliable because researchers inevitably attend to and record different information (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 138). To systematize our observations, we developed an observational

Table 1 Focal schools characteristics, 2018–2019

School1	Grade Level	% Black	% Latino	% White	% FRL[a]	% SWD[b]	% ISS[c]
Dalton	6–8	25	25	40	50	15	15
Lakeshore	6–8	20	30	40	50	10	15

[a]Free and reduced lunch

[b]Students with disabilities

[c]In-school suspension

protocol for each researcher on our team to use that was informed by Carspecken's critical qualitative research methods (1996). The protocol included verbatim speech acts, bodily movements and posture, low-inference descriptions, time stamps, diagrams, and bracketed observer comments (Carspecken, 1996). The observation protocol also included sections for higher-level summaries of the context and a section for researchers' hypotheses about what was happening at each site, and follow-up steps to pursue information to expand, confirm, or negate these preliminary ideas (Carspecken, 1996, p. 47). Each research assistant was trained in how to use the protocol.

During the fall of 2018, the first author recruited traditional, district-managed (i.e. non-charter) public schools in a large urban school district. She circulated a one-page study overview among school principals and deans inviting their participation. Incentives included a $250 gift card for each participating school and a $20 gift card for individual interviewees. The current analysis relied on a subset of data collected as part of this larger study on in-school discipline. Of the seven schools that volunteered, this manuscript addresses data from two schools that had designated in-school suspension rooms. Dalton and Lakeshore (all school, student, and staff names are pseudonyms) are both traditional, district-managed middle schools. Each school enrolled a percentage of Black, Latino, and White students, making them racially integrated[1] by district standards (Table 1).

During data collection, each research assistant adopted the role of observer and all school staff were informed that we were collecting data for research purposes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Observations are intended to take place in the setting where the phenomenon of interest naturally occurs (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Given this, one research assistant visited each school's in-school suspension room ten times for 60–90 min over a five-month period, for a total of 20 observations used in this analysis. We reviewed observations regularly as a team to ensure consistency with protocol and to engage in early data analysis. Once data collection ended, we reviewed all fieldnotes and created holistic summaries of each school's in-school suspension room. To create pattern-based summaries, the lead author and two graduate students coded observation excerpts using a codebook that included

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[1] Proportionate enrollment of Black, Latino, and White students does not necessarily imply integrated classrooms (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Oakes, 2005; Tyson, 2011).

five main deductive categories, each with inductively derived sub-codes (McQueen, 2008). We coded in several rounds to clarify codebook inclusion and exclusion criteria and to reconcile disagreements (McQueen, 2008). Codebook categories included referral reasons and locations, students and staff activities, and whether the positive or negative nature of staff-student interactions. We then created qualitative data displays summarizing the key components of each school's discipline room (Miles et al., 2014). We sent a copy of each school summary to the school leadership team and invited feedback to ensure validity of the primary record (Carspecken, 1996). We then wrote analytic memos using our theoretical framework to interpret and explain what we had observed (Miles et al., 2014).

Findings

In the sections that follow, we first argue that in-schools suspension rooms constituted a *deep* form of discipline, in that it was primarily used to punish students and was readily used for violation of minor and uncodified rules, giving the discipline net wide reach. Furthermore, the conditions of in-school suspensions rooms rendered formal educational opportunities unavailable to students, thus posing an impediment to academic achievement. Educators used in-school suspension disproportionately as punishment of Black students and Latino students, sequestering students to the margins of the school, creating racially segregated, *internal colonies*, inside majority White schools.

Dalton and Lakeshore In-School Suspension Rooms and *Deep* Punishment

At Dalton, school leaders held in-school suspension in a classroom located between that of the principal and the campus security guard. Staff referred to it as the "Contemplation Room." The room contained desks, a rolling whiteboard, books, a laptop cart, and cubbies for personal belongings. The "Contemplation Room" operated Monday-Friday during school hours. A supervisor was assigned to the room to observe students serving in-school suspension. Several other school staff also made visits to the room, including the school dean, paraprofessionals, a social worker, and a campus security guard. Dalton's policy limited the number of students inside the room to nine.

At Lakeshore, in-school suspension was held inside a windowless classroom referred to as "The Achievement Factory." Inside the room were desks, tables, exercise bikes, and a laptop cart. The room was staffed by a dean, who oversaw logistics and operations, a paraprofessional who was designated the room supervisor, and three other paraprofessionals who were regularly in and out of the classroom with students. The Achievement Factory operated Monday—Friday during school hours. There was no policy limiting the number of students admitted. At both schools, the in-school suspension rooms conveyed a sterile and stark ambience with few decorations or aesthetic pleasantries to soften the atmosphere.

Once in inside the rooms, it became evident that indeed, in-school suspension operated as a *deep*, or punitive, form of discipline (Irby, 2014), as evidenced in the compliance orientation enforced in the rooms and the admonishing approach of staff towards students. Students were required to turn their cell phones and personal belongings over to staff. Staff prohibited students from talking (often demanding silence). Students were prohibited from leaving each room. A rule-based system undergirded the in-school suspension rooms, defining the physical and social inter- actions of students. At Dalton, a set of room rules displayed on the white board read:

"Contemplation Room Rules".

1. Upon entry you must turn in your personal belongings and sign in.
2. No food, candy, gum, or drinks other than those provided by the school
3. You must sit in the seat assigned to you.
4. No verbal or non-verbal communication between students.
5. Raise your hand if you need work checked, have something to say, or need to get up.
6. All work must be completed to supervisor's satisfaction or you will have to come back.
7. Work silently and independently. Do not work with peers.
8. Any misbehavior will result in extra work that must be completed in order for you to return to class after your assigned day(s) here.
9. You will get extra work for being off-task and getting out of your seat without raising your hand for permission.

Students were instructed to handwrite a copy of the list upon entry. If the super- visor felt that students violated any of these rules, they could issue yet another punishment on top of the current in-school suspension. When students arrived for suspension, staff discussed the details of preceding incidents in front those in the room. There was a strict emphasis on obedience and silence enforced through ver- bal threat of punishment. For example, during one observation at Dalton, the dean, attempted to quell talking among students with a reprimand and threat of more pun- ishment, exclaiming, "why am I hearing talking out here? Do we need more days?" The students answered in unison: "no!" to which the dean replied, "then I do not want to hear not one more word." We also observed room supervisors yelling across the room at students to "be quiet" or to "sit down," along with issuing other rule reminders. We saw instances of sarcastic and denigrating comments made toward students about their intelligence and other characteristics. For example, Mr. Har- ris, a paraprofessional in Lakeshore's Achievement Factory, assigned a student, Derrick, the task of delivering a broom and paper towels to another classroom. As Derrick picked up the supplies, he nearly dropped them. Upon seeing this, Mr. Harris admonished Derrick, telling Derrick to "be smarter than the broom." At another point, Derrick later asked Mr. Harris, "which trashcan should I use?" to which Mr. Harris glared and sharply responded "Any trashcan!" as though it were obvious. Meanwhile Derrick appeared to recoil physically under these harsh words. These kinds of interactions created hostile and punitive atmospheres in which staff

leveraged sarcasm and denigration to coerce compliance from students. Research assistants repeatedly noted that these rooms felt tense and uncomfortable, and students were observed with solemn affect, evidenced by dejected facial expressions, slouching in seats, heads resting in hands or on desks, some with hoods pulled over their heads, concealing their faces.

One of the study's sub-questions concerned how *room supervisors* spent their time. Specifically, we wanted to understand if room supervisors engaged in behavior monitoring and enforcement practices, tutoring, mentoring, or restorative practices. Analyzing data across both schools, we found that, proportionally, in-school suspension supervisors in both schools spent much of their time engaged in behavior monitoring and enforcement practices, i.e., issuing rule reminders such as "no talking." The second largest category was that of administrative work, i.e., working at desks on their computers, talking to other staff members, or completing paperwork. These two categories accounted for approximately 60% of supervisors' time. Conversely, the proportion of time staff spent engaged in homework help or mentoring occurred at Dalton less than 10% of the time and at Lakeshore about a quarter of the time. Given that the room supervisors were referred to in title as "resorative justice coordinators," these data made contradictory the official titles and the kinds of activities in which supervisors engaged. In analyzing our observations, we examined them for instances of practices associated with restorative justice (such as "circles," mediations, or restorative conversations) responsibilities of the supervisors in these rooms, who were referred to by school leaders and others as "restorative justice" coordinators. We found that most of the dialogue that occurred between supervisors and students were limited to a narrow focus on what students "did" to have them sent to the room, and what form of punishment was necessary to hold them accountable.

A second sub-question concerned how *students* spent their time in the rooms, specifically if in-school suspension provided opportunities for students' academic or social-emotional development. At Dalton, observational data indicated that approximately 40% of the time students worked independently on computers, completing tasks like online social-emotional learning modules and a third of the time students were merely sitting at their desks. At Lakeshore, 50% of the time students were assigned independent work, again completing social emotional kinds of lesson materials. A quarter of the time students were just sitting. At Dalton, sometimes students were asked to complete cleaning assignments or run errands for classroom teachers. Consistent with supervisors' time use, there were few instances of students engaged in restorative mediations or practices. At both schools, opportunities to use in-school suspension to address schoolwork or to develop students' social and emotional skills were limited to their independent completion of paper worksheets. The worksheets were called "Refocus Forms," and asked students to reflect on what they had done to get in-school suspension and how they would avoid it in the future. These activities served as a form of punishment, as framed by one disciplinarian:

> "They have to answer a bunch of questions about what they did in order to take accountability, it's really quiet, it's not fun. There's a large amount of monotonous paperwork and it's purposefully annoying and I think it's good that it's annoying...so they can take accountability for their actions."

Students were also tasked with independently completing online social emotional learning modules. Exiting the room became contingent on completing the modules, which incentivized performative completion. Students were sometimes assigned more modules for perceived rule violations in the room, thus extending their stay. Modules sometimes became the source of student's frustration and conflict, such as was observed one day when we witnessed a student struggled to use the technology, becoming upset and agitated with staff over its completion.

Returning to our theoretical framework, the qualities of both in-school suspension rooms aligned with Irby's concept of deep punishment in that the rooms were a place for punishment, with supervisors spending much of their time monitoring and enforcing compliance and relying on sarcasm and derogatory comments that created a hostile climate. The high proportion of time that supervisors spent on compliance and administrative tasks compared to restorative or academic tutoring, combined with the amount of time students spent engaged in solitary work or merely sitting in the room was indicative of in-school suspension as basic form of social control and containment used during the school day. That supervisors could assign additional tasks and thus extend students time in the room, further impeded students' return to class and was also another indication of deep punishment (Irby, 2013). The punitive and sometimes denigrating nature of the in-school suspension room coupled with its physical confinement to a self-contained classroom inside each school building suggested it operated as a form of social exclusion that sequestered students and enforced social isolation (Silver, 2006).

In-School Suspension as a *Wide* Net

In addition to being a deep form of discipline, in-school suspension also exhibited indicators of casting a wide net, in that it impacted high numbers of students, particularly at Dalton. We observed many students each time that we visited in suspension rooms. At Dalton, we saw a wide range, between 10 and 30 students at a time during each 90-min visit. In one visit, the Dean described a class of 15 students in suspension as a "calm day." The number of students in suspension rose and fell over the course of single observations. For example, during another visit, we first arrived finding 10 students in the room, but the number increased to 20 over the course of the observation. A steady stream of students flowed in and out of Dalton's room. During other visits, we saw 25 and 30 students at different times in the room. At Dalton, there were not one visit across the five-months where we did *not* see students in the in-school suspension room. During the course of the study, Dalton's suspension room underwent an important change that made further evident the wide nature of in-school suspension. The principal removed the middle rung of the school discipline ladder, which required teachers to use a classroom intervention prior to sending students directly to in-school suspension. This change made it easier and faster for teachers to send students to in-school suspension. This type of policy change is what Irby refers to as *net deepening*, when a school policy is modified to make more severe punishment increasingly likely. We observed that this change appeared to increase teacher referrals to the room as evident by an increasing

number of students in the time period following the change. Whereas Dalton had no limits on the number of students sent to suspension, Lakeshore's school principal capped the number of students to nine. When the classroom reached nine, the supervisor would announce on the intercom that no more students could be sent to suspension. Although suspension was used regularly at both schools, the number of students per observation at Dalton outpaced that at Lakeshore.

In addition to impacting a wide number of students at each school, further demonstrating in-school suspension's *wide* net was its use as consequence for a broad number of rule infractions. Whereas narrow discipline nets envelope a small percentage of students who are believed to have committed the most serious types of misconduct*, wide* discipline nets ensnare not just students believed to have committed the most serious offenses, but also those who are involved in minor misconduct. In coding observational data, we found that students were sent to in-school suspension rooms for quite minor reasons, which according to staff's own terminology included "horseplay," "pushing and shoving," throwing things like "pencils or teddy bears", "altercations," and "fighting." Other reasons included "missing work," "using cell phones," "sleeping in class," "misusing school supplies," "not changing into gym clothes," "being late to class," and "running in hallways." School staff further described students being sent to in-school suspension for being "disruptive" and "defiant," for "not getting it together," "not following instructions," "not walking," "not listening," and, "not doing what they are supposed to do," exhibiting "sass" and "sarcasm" and "calling the teacher names." One administrator observed that many of these behaviors did not actually warrant a referral to the in-school suspension room, saying, "a lot of the stuff that kids are getting kicked out for, like not opening their Chromebooks fast enough, or talking in class… those are all tier-one stuff that teachers should be able to handle, not removable offenses." That in-school suspension was allowed to be used for such minor and subjective reasons created a wide net under which a staff member or educator could use it as punishment for nearly any perceived behavioral infraction.

Segregated Suspensions Rooms Creating Internal Racial Colonies

Another sub-question guiding this study concerned racialized patterns of in-school suspension. Burgeoning research on in-school suspension suggests racial disparities exist, but would this be the case inside these suspension rooms? Observational data suggested that yes, disparities existed. According to school-level data, student enrollment at Dalton was 39% White, 32% Latino, 20% Black, and 6% Multiracial. At Lakeshore, student enrollment was 37% White, 26% Black, 25% Latino, and 9% Multiracial. Thus, at both schools, White students were the largest single category of students. Despite this, within observations, we saw a higher proportion of Black students and Latino students inside suspension rooms. A descriptive analysis of school-level discipline data provided further evidence of disparities. At Dalton, the in-school suspension rate was 28% for Black students, compared to 19% for Latino students and 8% for White students. At Lakeshore, the in-school suspension rate was 51% for Black students, compared to 23% for Latino students and 12% for White

students. At both schools, then, educators were assigning in-school suspension to Black students at three-times the rate of White students, and to Latino students at twice the rate of White students. Although White students were the majority racial group at both schools, educators used in-school suspension in racially disproportionate ways. Because of these racialized dynamics, in-school suspension functioned as a form of racialized sequestering—racially relegating Black students to secluded spaces and enforcing social exclusion from the broader school community while exempting White students from its use (Wiley, 2021). Given the racialization of in-school suspension, and the physically separate nature of these rooms, the concept of internal colony serves as a powerful lens to illuminate the racialized implications of such separation (Watts & Erevelles, 2004). Within this framework, race and ethnicity operate as organizing constructs used by the White elite to physically confine and socially dominate non-White groups (Watts & Erevelles, 2004). Using this lens, the segregated nature of in-school suspension rooms begins to reflect a physical, racialized separation, and the practice of in-school suspension begins to appear as a tool of the White majority used to isolate and confine Black students and Latino students during the school day.

Discussion

These findings reveal these in-school suspension rooms as creating a punitive and racially disparate form of school discipline. Using Irby's conceptualizations of *deep* and *wide* discipline nets, we find that in-school suspension was a punitive practice, used for minor reasons, that subjected students, the majority of whom were Black students and Latino students, to harsh and denigrating social interactions with school adults. These in-school suspension settings were in fact exclusionary and exposed Black students and Latino students to segregated and adverse environments. The historical roots of exclusionary discipline in earlier decades of school segregation, and the modern use of it in segregating ways inside "integrated" schools, draws a line between past and present. The segregated nature of in-school suspension rooms, reflects what Erevelles and Watts conceptualize as an "internal racial colony." Such spaces reflect a "historically segregated system that is parallel to the general education track—one that privileges certain groups by separating, marginalizing and criminalizing student" (Watts & Erevelles, p. 289). The lack of learning-based activities exposed the limitations of these disciplinary classrooms to fulfill obligations to provide educational opportunities for students. These practices also reinforced social boundaries between educational opportunities and students along racialized lines. These conditions indicate that in-school suspension can be used in ways that render it yet another form of exclusionary school discipline, despite that it occurs "in school."

In-school suspension is sometimes discussed as a viable improvement from out-of-school suspension, but under conditions such as those we found, it is likely to have educational and stigmatizing consequences along lines of race, impacting students both inside and outside of the suspension room. The loss of learning opportunities and stigmatization can have far-reaching social and economic impacts. The

minor and subjective nature with which suspensions was used likely played an active role in sequestering Black students and Latino students to in-school suspension rooms at rates higher than White peers. Extant scholarship indicates that students of color in general, and Black students in particular, are often disciplined for minor and subjective categories that rely on school personnel's judgement (e.g., "disrespect") (Annamma et al., 2019), whereas White students are disciplined for more objective incidents (e.g. bringing a weapon to school). Such patterns indicate that *wide* nets, made so by the inclusion of a variety of minor offenses, created an entry point to sequester students of color inside suspension rooms. Because of the adverse conditions illuminated by these and other findings, the issue of in-school suspension should be a priority for education researchers and the education policy community. Scholarship on out-of-school suspension has been an important ingredient for illuminating and spurring changes in discipline policy, yet in its place, in-school suspension continues to be a tool used by school leaders, and it is one that needs closer scrutiny by scholars. Specifically, further inquiries into in-school suspension policy, implementation, and qualitative conditions would help to augment the growing body of quantitative research on this issue and inform both academic and policy knowledge.

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